

David Lebow and Richard Ned Lebow, “Unilateralism Across The Border: U.S. – Mexican Relations and the War on Terror”¹

Unilateralism is a key concept in the study and practice of foreign policy, but its conceptual meaning is often taken for granted, and its political significance is often wrongly evaluated. In this chapter, we distinguish unilateralism from multilateralism – a difficult conceptual task – and differentiate unilateral policies from unilateral rhetoric. We explore the political significance of each form of unilateralism in the context of efforts by successive US administrations to limit drug trafficking and to regulate illegal immigration from Mexico into the United States. We conclude by setting the Mexico case in comparison with the Iraq war and drawing out a set of policy and theoretical lessons about the efficacy of unilateral policy and rhetoric, and the implications for understanding the relationship between power and influence.

Unilateralism

Unilateralism has two distinct dimensions: it describes specific foreign policies and a broader political orientation. Both refer to efforts by a state to impose its preferences on another actor without consultation or negotiation. It is also used to describe initiatives carried out without consultation or approval of interested third parties or regional and international organizations. An initiative that has evolved in the course of consultation

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with interested third parties, and perhaps reflects their input and preferences in part, is not generally considered unilateral even if it is implemented by only one state.

The uni-multilateralism distinction is not an either/or binary. Foreign policy initiatives can be arrayed anywhere along the continuum between these poles, and entail a subjective judgment. The George W. Bush administration insisted that the invasion of Iraq was a multilateral effort by the “coalition of the willing” to bring about regime change. Opponents denounced it as unilateral because the administration failed to gain authorization from the United Nations Security Council or to win the support of key Western allies. Using one metric, the invasion qualifies as multilateral because the United Kingdom participated in the military action, as did other powers once Saddam was overthrown. The invasion can nevertheless be characterized as unilateral because it violated the international norm that military intervention requires NATO or UN support. President George H. W. Bush had recognized the validity of the norm by obtaining Security Council backing for military action against Iraq in 1991.

Alongside describing policy, unilateralism can also refer to the language in terms of which decision-makers and citizens use to perceive and evaluate policies. The perception of what is multi- or unilateral changes over time as new norms emerge or traditional ones lose force or even disappear. This fluidity facilitates the political utilization of multi- and unilateralism as labels to defend or oppose particular initiatives. Shifts in public opinion, often due to public relations efforts by supporters and opponents of such initiatives, feedback into understandings of multi- and unilateralism and these understandings in turn can influence policy or the ability of a government to gain support for initiatives across a broad spectrum of policy domains. The language of unilateralism

that emerges in one domain may have unforeseen effects in shaping policies in altogether different domains.

The bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico illustrate the perils of unilateralism. From the Nixon administration on, drug interdiction became a growing concern and was initially approached with a multilateral framework in which the United States and Mexico worked out cooperative agreements. US policymakers repeatedly violated these agreements when they felt hampered by them. Their unilateral initiatives backfired when discovered by Mexican authorities. Renewed negotiations became necessary, which often resulted in Washington giving away more and getting less in return. More restricted multilateral options provided incentives for new unilateral action.

During the Bush administration, we enter a new phase in US-Mexico relations, in which we observe the interplay between the levels of rhetoric and policy at work. Unilateral U.S. policy with respect to both Iraq and drug interdiction led to shifts in how policies were perceived and evaluated in both the United States and Mexico. The long-standing stresses of US-Mexico relations, well-captured by the checkered history of bilateral interdiction policy, thwarted Mexican support for the Bush administration's Iraq policy. Meanwhile, pro-unilateral rhetoric swirling around national security concerns in the United States prevented American leaders from successfully cooperating with Mexico on immigration reform. Not only can the unilateral pursuit of interests make those interests more difficult to achieve, but the unilateral pursuit of interests in one domain interferes, via the interconnections between rhetoric and policy, with goals in what would seem to be altogether different domains. The term "blowback" was invented by the CIA to describe unintended, negative results of secret American actions abroad for American

interests in other areas.¹ US unilateralism toward Mexico produced such blowback. Repetitive unilateral American incursions into Mexico contributed to the aggrandizement of power by Mexican drug lords, making it more difficult for Mexico and the US to interdict the flow of drugs across the border. As we shall see, American unilateralism toward Iraq also came back to haunt policy-makers in their efforts to work with Mexico to limit drug trafficking.

Drug Interdiction Policy: 1970-2000

Our story begins in the 1970s, when Mexico became an increasingly attractive place to grow, process and trans-ship drugs to the United States. By 1975, 87 percent of the heroin and 95 percent of the marijuana entering the US was thought to come from Mexico.² Drug lords effectively controlled the so-called “critical triangle” of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua through violence and bribery. The Mexican government was aware of the problem, and sought to develop a joint strategy with Washington for suppressing the production and transport of drugs.³ Mexico rejected an American plan for joint border operations in favor of an extensive eradication program. Under “Operation Condor,” American agents and technical advisors worked with their Mexican counterparts and soldiers to eradicate marijuana and other drug fields and to confiscate cocaine. By 1980, Mexico’s heroin exports to the US had declined from 87 to 25-30 percent of the total, and “Operation Condor” was judged a huge success.⁴

Although the successes of the 1970s were in part attributable to Mexico’s willingness to cooperate with the United States, President Salinas nevertheless imposed limits to cooperation with the US when it interfered with Mexican sovereignty. The

“Northern Response Force,” was a relatively successful program consisting in rapid response teams of helicopters and aircraft acting on the basis of intelligence supplied by the US military to intercept illicit flights carrying drugs across the border. Mexico halted the program when American tactical teams and P-3 aircraft consistently violated Mexican airspace.⁵

The success of “Operation Condor” and the “Northern Response Force” confirmed American officials in their belief that drug importation from Mexico could be seriously curtailed. It encouraged the Nixon, Reagan and, to an extent, the Clinton administrations to consider more interventionist, unilateral initiatives when Mexico began imposing restraints. They led to frustrating and often counterproductive results.

“Operation Intercept” was launched by the Nixon administration in September 1969 with the avowed goal of preventing any drugs from crossing the border from Mexico. It assumed that the Mexicans had been dilatory in their interdiction efforts and could not be relied on. Officials pressured Mexico to allow the US to conduct aerial surveillance over cocoa and marijuana growing areas and to use newly developed and largely untested herbicides to destroy crops they discovered.⁶ Not surprisingly, the Mexicans resisted the American pressure, and repeated meetings failed to lead to any agreement. One drug expert at least recognized that the “key American requests touched the very sensitive nerve of Mexican sovereignty, for they involved US participation in exclusively Mexican internal affairs.”⁷

Nixon was undeterred, ordering the task force to proceed in implementing its border control operations. The Defense Department placed Tijuana off limits to military personnel and required all civilian planes entering the US from Mexico to file flight plans

and periodically report their positions. Temporary roadblocks were set up in Brownsville, El Paso and San Diego. Over a three week period, at the cost of some \$30 million and involving thousands of US military personnel and border agents, 4.5 million individuals and their vehicles or planes were inspected. Very few drugs were intercepted, but business on both sides of the border dropped off by some 70 percent in the communities most affected.⁸ Liddy nevertheless considered it a huge success: “It was an exercise in international extortion, pure and simple and effective, designed to bend Mexico to our will. We figured Mexico could hold out for a month; in fact, they caved in after two weeks, and we got what we wanted.”⁹

Mexican border towns and the federal government alike were outraged. One Mexican official described the impact on the Mexican psyche as “equaled only by the assassination of President Kennedy. The whole affair is still so sensitive, so painful to most Mexican people that they literally avoid discussing it.”¹⁰ President Diaz Ordaz publicly condemned “Operation Intercept” as discriminatory and insulting, noting the deep resentment it had provoked among Mexicans. Nixon hastened to issue an apology for the “frictions” and “irritations” it had caused, and promised to work in a more cooperative manner in future ventures.¹¹ US negotiators were compelled to accept that any accelerated anti-drug campaign would have to be conducted “exclusively by Mexican personnel under Mexican direction.”¹² A joint working group was established but came up with no new initiatives.

In the absence of an agreement with Mexico, the Drug Enforcement Administration began sending undercover agents to Mexico without alerting the Mexican government. Washington’s concerns intensified when one of the agents, Enrique

Camarena Salazar, was murdered in February 1985. Ten days after his disappearance, the Reagan administration put “Operation Intercept II” into motion, which entailed stricter inspections and partial closure of the border. In 1985, as in 1969, the US used the border as a high-profile stage from which to signal disapproval of Mexico’s antidrug performance.¹³ The Mexican government made little headway in bringing Camarena’s murderers to justice, as they appeared to have close connections to the country’s federal police force. In March 1986, the administration escalated its pressure on Mexico with “Operation Leyenda,” closing the border for eight days. They bribed Mexican police to kidnap a drug lord thought to be responsible for Camarena’s murder, and to secret him across the border for arrest and trial.¹⁴ These actions accelerated negotiations led to the February 1989 Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting Drug Trafficking and Drug Dependency. Mexico compelled Washington not to undertake any actions on their territory, which is “reserved by national laws or rules exclusively to the authorities of the other country.”¹⁵

The US ignored the agreement from the outset. In April 1990, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents kidnapped Humberto Alvarez-Machain, a prominent obstetrician thought to be involved in the Camarena affair, and brought him to trial in the US where he was acquitted. Supported by other foreign governments, the Mexicans challenged the legality of the kidnapping, arguing that it violated Mexican sovereignty and the 1978 US-Mexico Extradition Treaty.¹⁶ Mexico halted all American anti-drug operations in their country, and allowed, or possibly encouraged, the news weekly, *Proceso*, to publish the names of forty-nine DEA agents operating undercover in the country.¹⁷ These actions brought the US to the negotiating table where it accepted the

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1991 “Mutual Assistance Treaty,” which established stricter guidelines for DEA agents in Mexico. It also had to make concessions in another treaty on extradition and agree to a bilateral agreement that prohibited cross-border abductions.¹⁸

The Clinton Administration, motivated by a shared stake in the North American Free Trade Agreement, abided by its agreements for a few years. It became increasingly concerned over the laundering of drug money by Mexican banks. On May 16, 1998, as part of “Operation Casablanca,” twelve Mexican bankers were lured to Las Vegas and arrested by DEA agents. Criminal indictments were brought against three of Mexico’s largest banks and prominent bank officials.¹⁹ Mexicans were angered by the sting operation, conducted without their knowledge. President Zedillo refused to extradite five Mexican bankers, wrote a letter of protest to the State Department and complained bitterly to President Clinton by telephone.²⁰

Unilateral policies by the Nixon, Reagan, first Bush and Clinton administrations consistently backfired over the course of four decades: they provoked harsh and public reactions by Mexican officials, who resented US infringement on their country’s sovereignty, secrecy about undercover operations, gaining cheap political capital from well-publicized but generally ineffective border operations, and consistently violating treaties and agreements. Periodically, the Mexican government would placate the US and arrest major drug figures, usually at critical moments in the certification process, when the administration had to inform the Congress if Mexico had made serious efforts to arrest and try traffickers and corrupt public officials. But this was reciprocal politicking and not effective cooperation.

Bilateral Spring

Vicente Fox's election in 2000 ended 71 years of one party rule in Mexico. Fox and Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda sought to differentiate their foreign policy from that of their predecessors by vocally promoting democracy and by strengthening those institutions that promised to limit unilateralism. They demonstrated their democratic bona fides by distancing Mexico from Castro's Cuba, which had enjoyed a close relationship with previous regimes. Fox and Castañeda hoped to gain a status in the world that reflected that Mexico's position as the world's ninth largest economy, and economic and cultural bridge between North and Latin America.²¹

The new Bush administration had strong incentives to cooperative with its Mexican neighbor. Criticized during the 2000 presidential campaign for his lack of worldly experience, Bush badly needed a foreign policy success. Mexico seemed an easier arena in which to achieve it than in the Middle East or North Korea. Bush also felt some degree of ease in dealing with Mexico, given his Texan background and the fact that its new president was a rancher like himself. President Bush declared that Mexico was his country's single most important international relationship and Fox and Castañeda came away with exaggerated expectations about Bush's ability to deliver on "the whole enchilada," as Castañeda put it. Bush seemed genuinely committed to gaining support within the bureaucracy and the Congress for legalization of guest workers, changes in visa policy and greater development aid, a list of goals that would not have been difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances.²²

The two leaders made a *de facto* deal: Mexico would get tough on drugs and the US would alleviate the abuses and hardships of migrant Mexican workers. President Fox

lived up to his half of the bargain. In November 2002, he signed a comprehensive and tougher National Drug Control Plan that publicly acknowledged the gravity of Mexico's drug problem and the need for inter-agency coordination to combat it. In March 2003, Mexican authorities captured Osiel Cardenas-Guillen, a major drug lord, and in July, Mexican and US officials declared that the Zambada Garcia drug cartel had been put out of business. The Bush Administration credited Mexico with making major strides in destroying marijuana fields and drug production laboratories and in arresting leading members of three major drug cartels and other figures involved in money laundering. In January 2005, Mexico extradited Agustin Vasquez-Mendoza to the US for trial as an accomplice in the 1994 murder of DEA agent Richard Fass. In March, after an eighteenth month collaborative Mexican-American investigation, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency announced the arrest of ten Mexicans in charge of smuggling cocaine in the country for a major drug cartel. Tipped off by Mexican authorities, the DEA arrested cocaine kingpin Agustin Haro-Rodriguez when he crossed the border into Arizona in October 2005.

Bush indeed sought to hold up his end of the bargain. In September 2002, the annual drug certification requirement was essentially eliminated and replaced with a requirement that the President withhold assistance from countries that had "failed demonstrably" in their counternarcotics efforts.²³ In September 2003, Mexico was not on the list of offenders. In January 2004, Bush proposed an overhaul of the immigration system that would permit American companies to hire foreign workers when no Americans could be found for the jobs. Further, the system would provide temporary legal status for new foreign workers, and to undocumented workers already working in

the country. In May 2006, Bush once more expressed very strong support for comprehensive immigration reform.²⁴

The Iraq War and Return to Unilateralism

The Bush Administration made a real effort to improve relations with Mexico, but cooperation soon foundered. Two important causes of this deterioration both trace back to the unilateralist conception of national interest that peaked in the aftermath of September 11th. In each case, the issues – the Iraq war and drug interdiction, and domestic security and immigration – were framed primarily in terms of the rhetoric of US unilateralism. Policies were perceived and evaluated in both the United States and Mexico accordingly. In the US, the idea of border security was redefined in light of the newly felt threat of terrorism. Many Americans conflated the perceived threat to homeland security posed by a porous southern border with the need for a “tough” immigration policy.²⁵ Meanwhile the Mexican government refused to endorse or participate in the Iraq war, in part because it resonated too closely with precisely the brand of American imperiousness that had fostered resentment for generations.

After September 11th there was a widespread backlash in the US against the influx of immigrants across the southern border. President Bush and Congress grew more interested in strengthening border controls in response to public concerns over illegal immigration, which became markedly more pronounced as immigration and homeland security became linked. Responding to recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 clamped down on the border in the name of national security. The REAL ID Act of 2005 further tightened border controls and established new national standards for drivers’ licenses. In November 2005,

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff announced the “Secure Border Initiative,” a multi-year effort to secure US borders, especially the one shared with Mexico. In December, the House passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Control Act of 2005, to further strengthen border security and employment screening, mandate detention of illegal immigrants, make it a federal crime to assist illegal aliens and fund a fence and sophisticated surveillance equipment along the Mexican border.

This spate of legislation angered Mexicans in its substance and execution. During border policy negotiations in 2002, Mexican officials signaled their willingness to work out a comprehensive anti-terrorism border security agreement, but only on the condition that it also addressed immigration policy. The US flatly refused to address the issue.²⁶ Mexico routinely denied American requests for extradition of drug lords because of its own prohibition against life sentences and the death penalty. Congress retaliated with the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act of November 2005. This barred economic aid to any country that refused to extradite people accused of killing American law enforcement officers, unless the Secretary of State issued a waiver. In December 2005, the Mexican foreign ministry issued a press release asserting that legislation that focused on security in the absence of comprehensive immigration reforms was bound to fail. In January 2006, the Mexican government protested shootings of undocumented Mexicans by a Border Patrol agent in California and a police officer in Texas. Generally speaking, once immigration was reframed as a unilateral issue of national defense, there was no room for bilateral compromise with Mexico. Border policy was dictated by the imperatives of US homeland security, and Mexican concerns and priorities were set aside.²⁷

The rhetoric of unilateralism embraced, encouraged and exploited by the Bush administration in support of unilateral policy ventures was in part responsible for the undoing of its cooperative venture with Mexico. The US government consciously and deliberately emphasized its right, even its obligation, to pursue narrow unilateral interests to generate support for the Iraq War and other policies that were generally opposed by the global community. The Bush administration lost control over public opinion with respect to immigration. When the administration tried to pursue multilateral policies with Mexico, the right wing of the Republic party, primed by the Iraq war to think unilaterally, turned on and defeated its own political leadership. Conservatives who framed illegal immigration as a security issue saw no room for compromise. Those who had opposed immigration reform for other reasons jumped on the bandwagon. With approval ratings in 2006 at or near record lows, Bush's big push for immigration reform failed to win over what had once been his surest political base.

The implicit agreement between Presidents Bush and Fox – immigration reform in exchange for cooperation on narcotics interdiction and border security – was dead. “It’s a shame,” said a member of the opposition serving on Mexico’s Senate foreign relations committee, “because Mexico has been permanently supporting the United States on security and drug trafficking.”²⁸ In an interview at the very end of his presidency, Bush cited the failure of comprehensive immigration reform as one of the biggest disappointments of his administration.²⁹

US drug policy had unexpected implications for the Iraq War. Since losing half of its territory in the 1846-48 war with the United States, Mexico has been especially sensitive to American condescension and continental dominance, and correspondingly

prone to resist Washington's authority. This sensitivity was exacerbated by a long history of American unilateral policies toward Mexico, lack of respect for Mexican sovereignty and a casual disregard of previous agreements, all of which were manifest in US drug interdiction policy. Mexicans considered US policy consistently selfish, hypocritical, and imperious. Only half the Mexican population expressed sympathy for the US after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Suspicion of the US government deepened with the Iraq war.³⁰

Foreign Minister Castañeda backed the US in the UN, consistent with the Fox administration's efforts to prove a reliable ally, only to be excoriated by domestic audiences. Fox felt compelled to distance himself from his foreign minister. In late 2002, when it became increasingly evident that the Bush administration was gearing up for an invasion of Iraq, Mexican ambassador to the UN Adolfo Aguilar Zinser worked behind the scenes in support of the French effort to deny Security Council backing to the Americans. What really infuriated President Bush was President Fox's decision to give a nationally televised address explaining why Mexico would have voted against the US had the question of UN authorization come to a vote. The address was broadcast on Spanish language networks in the US within hours of Bush's speech justifying his decision to wage war without UN backing.³¹ Fox's speech "created a rare moment of national unity, one without parallel in recent... history."³²

The prisoner abuses at the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay further damaged US credibility in Mexico. Mexico has long resent the US proclivity to scold Mexico for human rights violations and comment on internal Mexican affairs.³³ Washington's

sidestepping of the Geneva Convention further contributed to an already widespread public perception of American hypocrisy.

Conventional interpretations of immigration consider it to be essentially a unilateral American issue, whereas drug smuggling is bilateral.³⁴ This misses the unavoidable political connection between these issues. If narcotics interdiction and border security dominated Washington's agenda with Mexico, the Mexicans framed their relationship with the US in terms of immigration above all else. In the hotly contested 2006 Mexican election, both presidential candidates spoke out against a border fence, defended Mexican autonomy, and voiced strong support for US immigration reform favorable to Mexican interests. Both candidates implicitly predicated further cooperation with the United States on acceptable immigration reform.

The Drug War, Mérida Initiative and Obama Administration

On the strength of his stance against US unilateralism, Calderón went on to win the Mexican presidential election. Shortly after taking office in December 2006, he sent federal troops into the state of Michoacán to combat violent drug traffickers. This intervention began an escalating conflict between the government and the drug cartels. 28,000 or more people have died in the ongoing "Mexican drug war." It has become the central issue in domestic Mexican politics, and exacts a serious toll on the country's political economic and social institutions. The drug war has now overshadowed illegal immigration as the primary political issue between the US and Mexico.

The drug war has ushered in the most violent period in Mexican history since the revolution. Extremely aggressive and highly organized terrorist groups pose a mounting

threat to the central institutions of Mexican political and social life. Corruption is pandemic, and those entities responsible for maintaining order in many regions have either been co-opted or have ceased to function. Mexican journalist Ricardo Ravelo estimates that half the nation's police force are on the payrolls of the drug cartels.³⁵ Any local official or journalist courageous – or foolish – enough to attempt to challenge the drug cartels is murdered, often with his family. Assassinations and kidnappings, many of which end with merciless beheadings, have become the norm. Parts of Mexico have become ungovernable. The military should be the government's leading weapon in the fight against the cartels, but it may be part of the problem. It stands accused of human rights violations and of acting as another cartel. In July 2009, Human Rights Watch noted that "Mexican Military courts... have not convicted a single member of the military accused of committing a serious human rights violation."³⁶ A small but influential body of critics allege that Calderón, who took office with a razor-thin electoral victory, is himself using the drug war as an excuse to stamp out political opposition.

For the US, the drug war means an ongoing influx of drugs, spill-over of violence and corruption over the border and the looming, if exaggerated, possibility of a "failed state" to the south. This unprecedented crisis precipitated a rapid shift in Mexican-American relations. In 2008, President Bush and the US reached an agreement with Mexico (the Mérida Initiative) to provide roughly \$1.4 billion dollars in assistance to Mexico to continue the fight against the drug cartels. It provided for an increase in aid to Mexico from \$65 million in 2007 to \$406 million in 2008.³⁷ This is the largest foreign aid package in the Western hemisphere since Plan Colombia a decade ago. The Mérida Initiative met with broad support from both governments and marks a high-water mark in

mutual cooperation. The current crisis has engendered recognition on both sides of the border of the serious and shared nature of the problem, and the need for cooperation. Since this time, the Obama administration has continued to aid Mexico in its struggle with drug trafficking. There is widespread recognition that the Calderon administration has shown “unprecedented willingness to increase narcotics cooperation with the United States.”³⁸

The central irony is that it took an unprecedented crisis and threats to both sides to bring about meaningful cross-border cooperation. It is telling that in 2009 the Obama administration arranged additional emergency funding outside its usual bureaucratic channels. With the drug war as the number one priority, the possibility of addressing immigration remains uncertain.

Mexico and Iraq

Let us now examine the Iraq war in comparative perspective. Mexico like Iraq has become a front in the “war on terror.” In Mexico, American drug demand drives drug cartels in search of profits. In Iraq, the American invasion set of a chain of events leading to a civil war, and a continued rise of jihadist terrorism against American occupation forces. In both conflicts, violent non-state actors are a shifting and murky constellation of groups difficult to categorize and committed to achieving their diverse goals.

Just as the problems have important similarities, so too do American responses and their results. As in Iraq, an underlying reason for the failure of American policy toward Mexico was unilateralism. It was and remains an expression of the belief that the US is so powerful it can impose its preferences on others by fiat. In both countries

Presidents violated existing agreements or long-standing procedures, showed a surprising disregard for local conditions, excluded from inner policymaking circles anyone with local cultural knowledge or experience, and persisted in denying that their policies were foundering.

In both cases, narratives of American unilateralism interacted in unexpected ways. Bush was uncharacteristically forthcoming in his efforts to cooperate with Mexico by proposing guest worker programs for illegal immigrants. Yet his uncompromising policy with regard to Iraq undermined his cooperative overtures with Mexico by generating Republican opposition on the Hill. The “war on terror” became the dominant frame of reference for many Republicans in relations with Mexico, depriving President Bush of the support he needed for his immigration bill. Mexican sensitivity to American imperialism, in turn, prevented Mexico’s president from supporting the war in Iraq.

The parallels suggest that the Iraq war marked no aberration in Mexican-US relations. American efforts to impose preferences in lieu of negotiating compromise outcomes is a long-standing pattern that reached a rhetorical and policy apex with the Bush administration. Iraq cannot be chalked up to post 9-11 panic coupled with new concern for developments in an historically unstable region. Nor can it be dismissed as an aberration by attributing it to the influence of neoconservatives. In contrast to Iraq, drug interdiction and immigration are long-standing issues and here too collaboration between the US and Mexico has been hindered by frequent violations of the letter and spirit of bilateralism.

Crisis did not come as an exogenous shock that derailed any multilateral policy making – arguably the case in “war in terror.” It arose after decades of failed cooperation

in the “war on drugs” that allowed drug cartels to reach an unprecedented levels of strength. The attempt to interdict drugs crossing the US-Mexico border resembles an incomplete course of treatment by antibiotic drugs; multiple but insufficient doses of interdiction helped to breed the most virulent and violent strains of drug cartels. These cartels grew increasingly resistant to further treatment until even vigorous and cooperative action could not squelch them.

These cases suggest that self-interest framed in narrow, egoistic terms is myopic and often self-defeating. In Mexico and Iraq, American foreign policy ignored the binds of constraints that would have better served American interests. They arise from international law, institutional and alliance obligations, norms of consultation and policy by agreement or consensus. With regard to its southern neighbor, we argued that the US felt free to try to impose its will by fiat, to frame international issues in unilateral terms and to ignore the perspective of the Mexican people and government. It continued to do so even when unilateral initiatives repeatedly failed to achieve their goals. The unilateral mindset became more pronounced in the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. America’s self-understanding as the only remaining superpower encouraged far-reaching and ultimately unrealistic ambitions, as evidenced by its interventions in Mexico and Iraq.

The Mexican and Iraq cases offer theoretical insights into the limitations of material capabilities. Contrary to realist expectations, material capabilities do not always translate into power and power does not automatically confer influence. The unilateral application of power may undermine rather than enhance power and influence. Neither the Mexican government nor Saddam Hussein was cowed by American power. Saddam’s

calculus will probably always remain opaque, but those of Mexican leaders are more or less matters of record. Considerations of national and self-esteem and domestic political survival limited their willingness and ability to make concessions to Washington. The unilateral exercise of American power only made them more recalcitrant and less cooperative. The same may be true of a large segment of the Iraqi people, who appear to back insurgents, not because they supported Saddam, but because they feel humiliated by an American occupation. In both situations, an American willingness to settle for less might have gained more.

Hans Morgenthau observed that power must be masked to be effective.³⁹ Giving into power deprives people of their autonomy and self-esteem, so accommodation must be rationalized. There are many ways of doing this, including legitimization of its exercise so that actors who must comply, or decide to do so, can interpret their response as conformity to accepted norms and principles of justice. Effective use of power must accordingly be for purposes close enough to such norms and principles as to allow those who comply to “normalize” this behavior in this manner. Naked power, and power exercised in contradiction of widely accepted norms – as in Mexico and Iraq – is likely to arouse opposition, have and unintended undesirable political consequences and generate “blowback.”

Mexico and Iraq suggest an important policy lesson: persuasion and common action is generally a more effective means of achieving and maintaining genuine influence, both domestically and internationally, than the exercise of power through threats, bribes, unilateral action and coercion. That said, there are situations where persuasion will not work. Saddam Hussein, Iran and North Korea appear to have been

equally unresponsive to carrots and sticks. In dealing with such leaders or countries, the choices are limited and often ineffective. Hence there is a temptation to resort to brute force, which often risks making matters worse unless conducted multilaterally and applied through institutions that are sufficiently fine-tuned to be up to their task.

Another lesson emerges from these cases, which harks back to Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian War. Great powers routinely exaggerate threats to their security or standing and feel the need to act aggressively in response. Great powers are even more aggressive and, not content with their advantages, routinely seek hegemony. They start wars they lose. Thucydides teaches us that great powers can often be their own worst enemy. American policies in Mexico and Iraq are the latest example of this phenomenon. In search of security and hegemony, the US damaged both.⁴⁰

Closely related to great power hubris is the tendency to export domestic threats. When these threats are politically difficult to confront at home, great powers project the problems on to others. This somewhat like individuals engaging in psychological projection. The American drug problem was consistently understood by successive administrations as more the result of supply than of demand. The lion's share of Washington's efforts went into reducing the supply, from Afghanistan, South and Central America and Mexico, and with little success. Even if the Mexican government is moderately successful in dealing with the cartels, it is unlikely that there will be much of a long term reduction of the flow of drugs across the border as long as high drug demand exists in the United States. This is the ultimate source of the trafficking problem and of the violence in Mexico.

President Obama has taken the novel step of recognizing that the American demand for drugs gives rise to supply, but there is nothing to indicate the administration's intention, strategy or authority to reduce this demand. Here is another parallel between drug interdiction and national security. Much of the terrorist threat to the United States has domestic roots, as did the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the anthrax episode. Terrorism, like drugs, has nevertheless been defined almost entirely as an external threat. This rhetoric is politically efficacious, but is counterproductive in the long-term. When combined with a tendency to address these problems unilaterally, such rhetoric makes it increasingly unlikely that bilateral problems can be satisfactorily resolved. This creates further pressures on leaders to emphasize the external nature of threats. Rhetoric projects the threat outwards and policy is directed towards the external threat, yet the interests of the United States appear to be less, not more effectively pursued.

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